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Cooperative Learning and Second Language Teaching: FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

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Since the late 1980s, ES/FL teachers interested in Cooperative Learning (Holt, 1993; Kessler, 1992; Lopriore, 1996) have come together to share ideas at the annual convention of the International TESOL organization. The 1997 convention was no exception. The first four authors hosted a Breakfast Seminar at which about 45 other teachers joined us to begin our day with good food, strong coffee (Lucilla suggested Italian coffee, but unfortunately none was to be found), and good discussion about frequently asked questions (FAQs) in using Cooperative Learning (CL) with our second language students.

Below is a list of the questions we discussed and the responses we received. Before and after the convention, we showed our list of questions to others and added their responses. The fifth author added her own views as well as helping to compile those of others. We included everyone's responses, even when one response seemed to contradict a previous one. Each teacher must make their own decision based on their own particular teaching situation and their own beliefs about education (Jacobs, Gan, & Ball, 1997). No doubt, you, our talented readers, will have some ideas we have not thought of. Please be so kind to write as to us and share them, so that we can share them with others. Thank you.

Note: Some of the responses came from an Internet discussion list on Cooperative Learning started in Malaysia. In those cases, the responder's name is given in parentheses after the response. Special thanks to Ted Panitz, a member of the list, who circulated the questions to other related lists. To become a member of the CL list (it's free), please follow this procedure:

Send an e-mail to: LISTSERVER@JARING.MY

Include in the body of the message: [Subscribe CL yourname](#)

All postings to the list should be sent to: CL@jaring.my

A. How can we cover the syllabus if we use CL? Doesn't it take more time to cover the same amount of material compared to when a teacher-fronted mode is used?

1. In Europe, few countries use participatory school activities. Thus, CL is slower at first because teachers need to learn how to use it and need to spend time incorporating it into their lessons, and students need time to learn to collaborate and become familiar with various CL techniques. However, CL is quicker and more efficient later.

2. Active learning strategies, such as CL, are much better than lecture alone for improving long-term retention, changing attitudes, improving problem-solving skills, developing collaborative skills. Thus, the long-term gain is worth the initial effort and time.

3. The syllabus should be rethought to include objectives for lifelong learning such as "learning to work with others". In that way, doing CL would, even more, be seen as covering the syllabus.

4. With CL we don't need as much repetition of points and examples of the points in order to provide reinforcement, because the reinforcement comes in the group activities (David L. Smith Feb 5 1997).
5. CL is more efficient because students can read the book or the lecture notes themselves. Why waste class time on that? What is more difficult for students to do in class is to take part in structured activities, with teacher support. They can't do that out of class.
6. In the traditional classroom, students learn that they don't have to read the assigned materials; the teacher will cover all the important stuff anyway. With CL, class time can be spent on trouble spots and going beyond the information given, e.g., application (David L. Smith Feb 5 1997).
7. CL apparently takes more time, but in the long run we can see how things speed up, as students become more successful and more enthusiastic about learning.
7. Individualized activities, such as grammar practice, can be done outside of class, e.g., at a self-access centre or on the computer. In that way, more class time is saved for activities which promote interaction, such as CL activities.
8. Concern about time is mainly our problem, not students'. We tend to forget they've got a different learning pace. Do our students really think they are "losing" time doing CL? They lose time only if they do not actually learn. The question should, then, be restated as "Do students learn more deeply and effectively when exposed to CL?"

B. How long (days, weeks, months, years) should CL groups stay together?

1. Changing groups frequently helps students get to know everyone in the class.
2. Long-term groups help students learn to work out problems, build group identity (via group name, flag, motto, handshake, etc.), and work on indepth projects. They also help students establish support networks. Sharon J. Gerow (Feb 5 1997) recounts one approach that worked well was that when a student asked to be changed because they couldn't get along with a groupmate, she said that she would change them to a different group as soon as they learned to work with that other student.
3. When groups last more than one day, procedures need to be in place to deal with absent students.
4. Long- and short-term groups can be used simultaneously. In other words, students can be a member of two groups at once. For example, students might be in one group to do a project which lasts a month, but at the same time in another group for a day to work on reading skills.
5. Base groups (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993) are long-term groups that last at least a semester and preferably for a number of years. Their purpose is not to work on projects or prepare for tests. Instead, they provide support and motivation, meeting regularly to see how each other is doing in school. Base groups members are like good friends with an academic focus. So, for example, if a student misses class, their base group members collect the handout and homework for them.
6. At the other extreme, an informal group can exist for just 15 minutes. For example, after watching a video, students can use Roundrobin to discuss and to ask and answer questions about what they just saw.
7. One figure for how long groups should be together often seen in the CL literature is six weeks. This gives students time to learn how to work with their group members, thus emphasizing the importance of allotting time for groups to discuss how well they are functioning and how they can function better.
8. Many experts on CL urge that groups be formed heterogeneously based on such factors as proficiency, sex, ethnicity, on task behavior, and/or preferred learning style. It takes a while for teachers to organize such groupings. Thus, we wouldn't want to have to do that every week.

9. If students already know which group they're in, we don't have to spend as much class time for them to get into their groups.

10. When long-term groups disband, there should be some type of closing, e.g., they can give each other small presents or write each other "thank you" notes or letters of reference for their next group.

11. Hopefully, groups will last forever, as the collaborative atmosphere engendered via cooperative learning can form friendships for life.

C. How can CL work in situations in which competition is stressed in the school system and the larger society?

1. Maybe there are currents in society moving it to become less competitive, especially in the information age, as people realize that ideas are best developed via collaboration. Education should promote this.

2. Maybe after more students, teachers, administrators, and parents have experienced CL, schools and society will begin to become less competitive (Kohn, 1992).

3. We need to educate students, colleagues, administrators, parents, and the public generally about the benefits of CL, otherwise they may feel that the usual competitive school environment is always the best way.

4. "One of the requests employers frequently make is for higher education to prepare students to work together in problem-solving and other formats" (Horace Rockwood, Feb 5 1997).

5. Between businesses there is competition, but within a business, cooperation is needed. This is precisely why businesses are asking schools to reconsider their competitive models (Brett Bixler, Feb 5 1997).

6. Living in a competitive society may mean that students need longer to adjust to using CL. Teachers need to be persistent (Ann P. Monroe, Feb 5 1997).

7. Stress criterion referenced grading. "I use cooperation instead of competition to get the idea across that the end goal of an assignment is not to be better than someone else but to learn the criterion behaviors set before students" (Elizabeth Howard, Feb 5 1997).

8. Some CL techniques, e.g., Teams-Games-Tournament (Slavin, 1990), use within-group cooperation but between-group competition.

9. CL shouldn't be the only study arrangement for students. Students also need to learn how to work on their own and how to compete with others in a healthy way.

10. CL can provide a kind of refuge for students who have trouble with competition.

11. Assign tasks so that less assertive students can have leadership roles sometimes.

12. Working with others increases students' chances for success, because they can pool their efforts and strengths.

13. It may take a lot of time and effort to change ingrained altitudes but the pay off will be great.

14. Competition is a culture-specific trait; incorporating cooperation validates other culture approaches.

15. Actually, there's a lot more cooperation going on in the world than many people think. Just look around you.

D. How can CL be used with students whose language proficiency is low?

1. Just about all CL techniques can be used with low proficiency students, as long as the language task is within their reach.
2. Remember, although students may be low in L2 proficiency, their intellectual capacity is often far greater. Thus, they can easily deal with the concepts of grouping, task assignments, and so on, if each person's role and the group task are clearly communicated.
3. Short, simple CL activities are useful, especially at first.
4. Low proficiency students need preparation time and language support, e.g., model dialogues, vocabulary work, and accompanying listening activities with a written version of the text, before they begin interacting in their groups.
5. Low proficiency students often lack confidence. CL builds confidence by providing a support group: a classic CL benefit.
6. Once low proficiency students become familiar with CL techniques, the techniques boost confidence by providing structure and clear expected outcomes. They know what to do.
7. When students are working in groups, teachers have more time for students who need extra help.
8. At the same time, working in groups means that the teacher isn't the only one available to provide help. Group members are there too.
9. Cross-age and other types of tutoring can be used, e.g., Buddy Reading.
10. Teaching collaborative skills becomes especially crucial, so that mixed proficiency groups can work. Such heterogenous grouping is advocated in many books on CL, e.g., those by Slavin (1990), who helped developed STAD (Student Teams- Achievement Divisions), CIRC (Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition), and other CL techniques.
11. Actually, many students are prepared to help one another if only we teachers would openly encourage the high achievers to support lower achievers. Indeed, the high achievers can benefit both academically and socially from such interaction.
12. Many CL activities, e.g., Think-Pair-Share, provide students time to plan what they will say before interacting with groupmates.
13. CL helps support and prepare low proficiency students for whole class discourse.
14. Groups help motivate low achievers by using peer motivation. "I can say that something is unacceptable, and students don't really hear me, but three of their peers get together and don't accept their work's level, and students will get to work" (Elizabeth Howard, Feb 5 1997).
15. Low proficiency students "have someone close at hand to ask and share with. They are up and doing, working hands-on" (Joy Runyon, Feb 5 1997).

E. How can CL be used with large classes?

1. Basically CL is used the same way in large classes as in small ones. We just have more groups.

2. Large classes need more preparation. This includes establishing criteria for group behaviour and for content understanding. This can be done with students. Then, we need to help students understand the criteria and monitor their achievement.
3. Establish routines early in the semester, so that students get into groups quickly and quietly. "If CL is well-planned, ..., large classes do as well as small ones" (Elizabeth Howard, Feb 5 1997). As with all CL, planning and preparation are key.
4. In a traditional classroom, most students' attention wanders while they "wait" as the teacher asks for individuals to "perform"; in CL students are much more active (Kagan's simultaneity principle [Kagan, 1994]), and thus more likely to be on task for the duration of the activity.
5. Large classes make CL even more important, because in a teacher-fronted mode, the larger the class, the less chance each student has to participate.
6. Teachers need to find ways to help students be more independent, not necessarily a bad thing, but definitely a challenge. Large classes push teachers to take that challenge (David L Smith, Feb 5 1997).
7. Because large classes make it more difficult for teachers to monitor groups, more time should be spent on helping students develop collaborative skills and more effort should be given to having students monitor their own groups, e.g., appointing pupils to be task-master in each group (Christine Lee, 10 Mar 1997). As Smith notes above, being forced to give students more responsibility is actually a good thing.
8. Students can be divided into base groups (Johnson & Johnson, 1994) which stay together for a whole term, year, or more. These help with such matters as attendance, catching up absent or newly admitted students, and homework. Students also join more temporary groups, but the base groups remain as a support network, so that students do not feel "lost" in a large class.
9. Rather than each group coming to the front of the class to do a presentation, use a CL technique such as Three Stray - One Stay (Kagan, 1994), in which three members of a group of four move to different groups, and the remaining member who has stayed gives the group's presentation to three classmates who have strayed over from other groups.
10. Divide the class in half or thirds for activities such as Jigsaw and Send-A-Problem (Kagan, 1994). In the latter activity, in a class of 48 divided into groups of 4, half the class (6 groups) send problems they have written to one another, while the other half sends problems only to other groups on their side of the room (Christine Lee, 10 Mar 1997).

F. How can cooperation be a content theme as well as a procedure?

1. Cooperation should permeate our teaching, from the *how* of teaching (part of which is CL) to the *what* of teaching.
2. Students can write, accompanied by peer feedback, about a time they successfully collaborated with others.
3. Groups can work together on social concern projects in the communities near their school, e.g., helping less fortunate people or protecting the environment.
4. Students can read about examples of collaboration in science, business, and elsewhere in society.
5. In content-based teaching, examples of cooperation can be found, e.g., the study of history does not have to focus on wars and conquerors.

6. Teach conflict resolution skills (Johnson and Johnson, 1991), and discuss with students how these skills can be applied in the classroom and beyond. then, encourage students to apply these conflict resolution skills and report on their success.

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